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Burma: Ethnic Group Disarray Will Probably Undermine Peace Conference

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Rifts within the most prominent coalition of armed ethnic groups, particularly on cease-fire negotiations with the Burmese Government, will probably mar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi's signature peace conference on 24 May. Aung San Suu Kyi had sought to increase the number of signatories to the Nationwide Cease-Fire Agreement (NCA) that is a prerequisite for decisionmaking authority at the peace conference. Groups can opt to sign what is called a "deed of commitment," allowing them to participate in discussions,

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— The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), one of the highest profile armed ethnic groups, and a smaller group have decided to leave the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), which has been committed to the current structure of the peace process, probably in part because of pressure from the largest armed ethnic group, the United Wa State Army (UWSA)

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— The UWSA, the KIA, and several smaller groups agreed in February to reject the NCA and pursue a separate process under UWSA leadership, dealing a blow to Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts to persuade more groups to sign. Three other UNFC members are still considering the NCA but want specific assurances, such as a halt in confrontations begun by the military,

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— A previous peace conference in August 2016 was widely seen as symbolic rather than substantive,

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Lack of progress at the conference will probably distract Aung San Suu Kyi from other pressing issues, including improving civilian-military relations. The civilian government and the military act as parallel decisionmakers and differ on issues such as the conditions for armed ethnic groups to sign the NCA

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— Aung San Suu Kyi apologized to a longtime economic adviser in January for not engaging with him on the economy saying it was because she was focused on the peace process,

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— In November, asserted the military had instigated clashes in northern Shan and Kachin states to undermine the peace process

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— The KIA's quitting the UNFC will probably lead to renewed, intensified fighting between the KIA and the military,

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